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Lebanon looks in vain for outside help, even intervention, to stop fighting

ANALYSIS

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JERUSALEM — Lebanon's inability to cope with its own problems has perhaps never been as painfully obvious as in the last two weeks. And once again, Beirut is pleading with an outside power not only to help, but to take over if necessary.

After a toll of some 300 dead and an estimated 1,000 injured in an exchange of car bombs and heavy artillery during what is being described as the most violent two weeks since the Israeli invasion three years ago, not a soul in public office suggested aloud: "Enough is enough. We Lebanese must straighten this out."

Instead, Lebanon's leaders, or at least those who are still speaking to each other, turned to Damascus for help, practically inviting the Syrians to take over their country.

But Syria's president, Hafez el Assad, has had almost a decade of intimate experience with Lebanon's imbroglio. His army occupies half of Lebanon already — some would say as a buffer between his own border and the part of Lebanon that is wracked by civil war.

Mr. Assad basks in the widespread perception that from Damascus he controls all of Lebanon. But analysts note that, while Lebanon's divided political chieftains travel to Damascus, Mr. Assad would not think of going to Beirut, and there is good reason to believe he will not send his army back there.

The Syrian leader would like to impose an arrangement for the restoration of peace in Lebanon. But observers believe he is reluctant to physically enlarge the dominion of Syrian control westward or southward.

For one thing, this would bring the Syrians back into a Beirut that has dramatically changed since his army withdrew in the face of the 1982 Israeli invasion.

The conflicting forces that exist in Beirut today are heavily armed. The Christians have equipment delivered by the Israelis and, later, by the United States. The Moslems have been equipped by the Syrians themselves, the Libyans and, in some cases, directly by the Soviet Union, according to intelligence sources in Lebanon.

In fact, the Shiite Amal militia received between 40 and 50 Soviet-made T-54 tanks from the Syrians less than a month ago.

But perhaps more important, the militias now are more battle-hardened than the army and accustomed to freedom of action that could pose a formidable obstacle to a Syrian attempt to take over all Lebanon and impose arrangements that fall short of the expectations of the various factions.

An incursion into southern Lebanon, where many analysts predict the bloodletting of the last two weeks in Beirut may move, would bring the Syrians closer to Israeli lines than either the Syrians or the Israelis want.

"For the moment, Assad enjoys the best of both worlds," says one Middle East analyst. "He appears to control Lebanon because all the Lebanese factions turn to him, but he has not committed his troops to the most difficult area of the country."

So it would seem. But this has not deterred the Lebanese from pleading with Mr. Assad to commit troops to the whole country, especially to Beirut.

The practical ineffectiveness of the Lebanese government, which was put together 18 months ago largely under Syrian supervision, was manifest this week.

Yesterday Prime Minister Rashid Karami called the first Cabinet meeting in four months to meet in President Amin Gemayel's home village of Biqfaya.

Those who went — about six of the nine Cabinet members — had to scurry for shelter from incoming ar-

tillery shells as they arrived. Two of the most important members of the cabinet, Nabih Berri, the leader of Amal, and Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze militia, did not even bother to attend.

With or without the two, however, the inherent weakness of the so-called Lebanese government was revealed.

For a more important meeting was being hosted by Gen. Ghazi Kanaan, the chief of Syrian military intelligence in Lebanon, at Chtoura, inside Syrian-occupied Lebanese territory.

Gen. Kanaan and the commanders of the Lebanese army and the Christian, Druze and Shiite militias he summoned there reportedly agreed to a cease-fire, possibly to be supervised by Syrian army observers.

However, even this minimal expansion of the Syrian presence was to be discussed later, according to the reports from Chtoura.

Lest there be any doubt about who really holds the power in Lebanon, Prime Minister Karami announced from Biqfaya: "While the Cabinet was in session, we were informed of the cease-fire agreement and the decision to discuss the deployment of Syrian army observers on all confrontation points."

In an unmistakable plea for Syrian intervention, the prime minister also called for the Syrian deployment "to contribute and share with us the responsibility for restoring peace to Lebanon."

The time for the cease-fire was set for 1 p.m. yesterday. Like scores of other cease-fires that have preceded it in the last decade, the hour passed with artillery still blaring away from both the Christian and the Moslem sides.

One theory among Middle East analysts is that Damascus may privately believe the only way to shake the Lebanese to their senses is to allow them to become exhausted by their own internecine warfare, even to supply the instruments if necessary.

But the Lebanese have demonstrated time after time that their capacity for self-destruction is practically inexhaustible. The country's sources of assistance for peacemaking — even from the Syrians — are exhaustible, however.